Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

LEWIS VAN HOOK

RECOLLECTIONS OF A SINGING SHIPBUILDER

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1983

Lewis Van Hook, 1991

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning

Cataloging Information

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Introduction by Jim Quay, Director, California Council for the Humanities.

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INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then <u>were</u> interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just <u>study</u> Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence that a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendents are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became <u>their</u> project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

September 1990
Regional Oral History Office
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Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Lewis Van Hook

Lewis Van Hook, age eighty-five, was the first interviewee for the project, "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California." I recorded an informal interview with him in 1983, two years before the project received its initial funding. We first met in Richmond at a reunion for World War II Kaiser shipyard workers in the spring of 1983. I interviewed him soon after that event in his Richmond apartment. This month, as we finish up the last of twenty oral histories from "On the Waterfront," I wanted to make sure that this pilot interview with Mr. Van Hook was included.

Mr. Van Hook's story is part of a larger one about the migration of thousands of people from the South and Midwest to work in California defense industries during World War II. He left rural Arkansas in 1943 to find work in the Kaiser shipyards in Richmond. He was thirty-seven years old and the father of eight children. His family joined him in 1944.

During the World War II years, Mr. Van Hook was a member of a gospel quartet called the Singing Shipbuilders. The quartet performed during lunch breaks in the shipyard, at launching ceremonies for Liberty Ships, and on KRE radio. The quartet disbanded after the war, but Mr. Van Hook continued singing and playing guitar. He performs regularly at his Sunday church services.

In addition to his oral history transcript, recently we adapted Mr. Van Hook's original story for the Richmond Community History Project: New Readers Series. His story, A Singing Shipbuilder, is part of a collection of eight books to be used as reading material for adult literacy students. It is illustrated with both family and historical photographs. A Singing Shipbuilder is available at seven Bay Area libraries and is being distributed to eighty-five adult literacy programs throughout California.

We appreciate Mr. Van Hook's enthusiasm and support for both of these projects. He has a lot of spirited advice for the younger generations.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

June 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

The Van Hook Family's Southern Roots

[Interview 1: September 7, 1983] ##[1]

Dunning: What is your full name?

Van Hook: Lewis Napoleon Van Hook.

Dunning: What year were you born?

Van Hook: I was born in the year of 1906.

Dunning: And where were you born?

Van Hook: In the state of Arkansas, in Nevada County.

Dunning: Were you born at home, or in the hospital?

Van Hook: At home.

Dunning: Did your mother ever tell you stories about that?

Van Hook: Yes. My daddy did. I remember him saying that as they moved from Louisiana to Arkansas by land, traveling with wagons, teams. My mother and the small children rode train.

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[1]This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended.

My father had to make another trip back to bring a team of mules. After leading one team some three, four days, he got home around midnight. My mother got painful from me. He didn't get to sleep. He had to go then and get some help. I remember him telling that.

Dunning: There must have been a midwife?

Van Hook: Yes. There was a midwife. He went and got her.

Dunning: Do you know where your parents were born?

Van Hook: In Louisiana.

Dunning: How about your grandparents?

Van Hook: Well, I think that's where they were born too, but I'm not real sure. I think that's where they were born.

Dunning: Did you know your grandparents?

Van Hook: My grandmother, I did. My grandfather I didn't.

Dunning: Did she ever tell you stories about when she was growing up?

Van Hook: Well, I don't remember any stories that she told about when she was young and growing up. On my daddy's side, my grandmother, I was around her a good while while I was small and just a child. On my

mother's side, I wasn't around them that much. I remember seeing him, but not her.

Dunning: Your grandfather on your mother's side?

Van Hook: That's right.

Dunning: Did your parents ever tell you stories about what life was like when they were children?

Van Hook: Yes, they've told me. I've heard them talk about how it was when they were growing up. They went to school, of course. Not very much of a term, but they have short terms.

Well, I heard my father tell once, when he was a little boy, his daddy was a deacon of the church. On Wednesday nights they would go to church. He would go with him for prayer meeting. He said there in the community they had a funeral of an old gentleman a day or two before Wednesday. The cemetery was right on the side of the church. He said they went that night and sat on the steps kind of waiting for the people to meet. While they were sitting, they noticed a dog creeped up and passed on by them, went on in through the cemetery gate, and went right to the grave of where they had buried this old man, and laid down on it. I never did forget that.

Dunning: It's one of those spooky stories.

Van Hook: Yes. Well, the dog, you wouldn't think he knew who was carried there. That was what was so strange about it. He knew who was carried there and put there, so I guess that's what. He didn't say. It was an actual dog. They went around there and saw him. He was there. You know, a kid, I remember that. I'll never forget.

Growing Up in Prescott, Arkansas

Dunning: What town did you grow up in?

Van Hook: I grew up in the town of Prescott, not right in town. I grew up out on a little farm right out of Prescott.

Dunning: Was that in Arkansas?

Van Hook: In Arkansas, right.

Dunning: What was your hometown like?

Van Hook: It was what you would call a country town. The population now runs a little better than four thousand. Back then, I'm sure it didn't. I know it didn't.

I can say this: I was just telling a couple of friends of mine that were here visiting me less than a week ago, that I've always said this about Prescott and the people there. There were some of the finest

people there. I mean, the white people, and the mixed. I know that in both races there are some of both kinds, but what I'm saying, while I grew up there, I witnessed some of the finest people that I've ever met right there.

I mean, I was there during the Depression. I had a chance to find out, when I needed help. The ones that I went to, they could have turned me down. I knew a man there. He ran the cotton gin.

His name was Will Mullen, they called him. During that Depression, if I didn't know how I was going to get food, I would get to him. He was kind of hard of hearing, chewed tobacco, and was tall.

He would bend over and say, "Huh?"

I would tell him what I wanted. He would run his hand in his pocket. You think I would ever forget that?

We didn't have no racial problems there. It was kind of peaceable.

Dunning: Was that unusual? It sounds unusual.

Van Hook: Well, in some places. We could hear of other places where there was problems.

Dunning: Why do you think it was different in Prescott?

Van Hook: Well, I just don't know. It's a good question. I'd just say there's some good people there among the white race.

Dunning: You mentioned that you went back recently for a trip?

Van Hook: Yes.

Dunning: How was that?

Van Hook: Well, it's a lot different than what it was then. I never thought there would ever be people so friendly and nice to you. I went to a place where I worked. I moved back there in the early '70s. I stayed five years and I worked at the Western Auto.

I went by the store and visited them. The owner, he and his wife, Ted and Ann Foster, were glad to see me. They were telling me they wished I would move back just to be there. Other places where I went, maybe some strangers among the young people there that were just friendly, nice, just wonderful.

Dunning: Can you describe your house, or apartment, or wherever you grew up in?

Van Hook: Where I grew up, there was a three bedroom house, you might just say a shack, with one wall, and a chimney. They got a man to build it, a wood chimney, not a brick. Around the front there was two shade trees and out the front yard gate and to the left was the big gate to the lot and the barn. Just as you come

off of the front porch, and let's say twenty, thirty feet to your left hand, was a deep well. We drawed water with the water bucket. I can just picture it in my mind right now, how it was.

Dunning: Did you have chores as a young boy, household chores?

Van Hook: What?

Dunning: Like getting the water from the well, or cleaning up, or emptying the garbage.

Van Hook: I was laughing and telling somebody here not too long ago how that was. I had three brothers older than me. They used me. That was my job to do until I grew out of it. They brought me up rough. They didn't pet me. They pet me some too, but when they got angry, it was just as rough on me as it was. I'll never forget that. They would use me as their handyman, tell me what to do.

I remember the very day that I stopped it. I had done got about fourteen. I was thinking here the other day about the fine timber that my daddy, back in them days, they would cut and give log rollers when they were clearing up land. That's what he did.

My oldest brother and the one next to him, they decided the saw needed sharpening, and the man to sharpen it was about three miles. So they called me. I was about fourteen, and I was just fed up with it then.

I told them, "No, I'm not going to take it."

That brought on the last fight. We went on from there. We went home. Just as we got in the backyard, I got a little more sassy, and my oldest brother, he attacked me. He caught a surprise there for a little bit. The other kids had to scream and holler. My mother ran out and separated us. From then on, they didn't handyman me.

Dunning: You made your point.

Van Hook: That's right. That's the way I came up.

Dunning: Did you have any sisters?

Van Hook: I had. There was five brothers and six sisters.

Dunning: Six sisters? So there were twelve? A dozen of you.

Van Hook: There were twelve. I had eleven [siblings]. Five brothers and six girls. My oldest sister was next to me.

Dunning: Did the girls have chores to do?

Van Hook: Yes. As they grew up, mother would be at us to do dishes and all that until they kind of got up. Then she taught them, let them do it.

Recollections of Mother, Willie Gertrude Van Hook

Dunning: Can you describe a typical day for your mother when all the children were living at home? Things that you remember her doing the most?

Van Hook: Yes. Well, I can remember. I'll never forget how my mother would raise the small children, what she had to go through. I remember on one occasion, to give you an idea what I mean about what she had to go through, we--I think it was me and my two brothers just older than me---were playing up in the field, where there was a cane field.

We were probably chewing cane, having fun. There was a plank fence, what we would call a plank fence. One of my brothers, I don't know why he wanted to climb up on the fence. It was made out of some old planks. Some of them had nails in them. As he went to climb up on it, a crooked nail hooked onto his toe. He couldn't get off of it. He went to screaming. We didn't know what was wrong.

We just ran home. It was about three blocks. We went home and told Mama that something had caught Buddy up there. She ran all the way up there. We ran with her then. He was still on the fence, crying and hollering. She went there and saw what it was, blood running. She tried to get him, but that nail was hooked, you know. I remember her having to work and find out what it was. Then she got him off of it.

I think about that now, many times that some kid's screaming, and my mother don't know what, and she would have to run. So I'm telling you what she went through. She was a sweet mother. What I be so thankful for, I said she was a sweet mother.

I remember, I was maybe five or six years old, around the far side. Mother, one night, called us to around her lap there, and told us that she wanted us to learn the Lord's Prayer. She started teaching it to us right there. I learned it right away.

She told us, "Every night, you say that before you go to bed." I haven't quit it yet.

I thank her for that, because I feel like my daddy, he taught me in public school. He was a music teacher. He taught me music. But she was the one that thought of this prayer. So I think that was a real sweet mother that taught one of her children to start praying.

Dunning: Was religion an important part of your household?

Van Hook: That's right.

Dunning: Was it a particular church?

Van Hook: We grew up in the Baptist church. We were members when we grew up. We joined Mt. Canaan, which is

Missionary Baptist. That's where I grew up. I was baptized about a mile and a half from the church out in a stream that was called Curuse Creek. I go by that now sometimes. I just have to pause, and I have stopped and went out and looked.

Dunning: How old were you when you were baptized?

Van Hook: Fourteen.

Dunning: So it's something that you remember well.

Van Hook: I remember that well.

Dunning: Were all your other sisters and brothers baptized in the same church?

Van Hook: Yes, they were. All of them. Let's see now. Yes, they were all baptized right there.

Memories of Father, Samuel Van Hook

Dunning: I'm going to ask you a little bit more about your father. What was he like?

Van Hook: My daddy?

Dunning: What was his name?

Van Hook: His name was Samuel.

Dunning: And your mother's name?

Van Hook: Willie. Her name was Willie Gertrude.

My daddy, we thought, was pretty strict. I wouldn't say that he was mean. I appreciate the way he was now. But he was strict on rules. We didn't think we would ever get to smoke after we got to be teenagers. He didn't go for that, but finally we got old enough that he would buy it for us. In a way, he treated me kind of like the brothers did. He just had me for the little boy.

Dunning: Were you the youngest boy?

Van Hook: I was ten years old before a younger one was born. So that's the way. He thought I ought to be the one to do the going around. Then, when they grew up, we lived out of town some nine, ten miles. There was a big sawmill there. My other three brothers, as they grew up, got to be teenagers, and old enough, they went there and went to work. That left me lonesome, lonesome.

I never will forget that I told him, that after I got about seventeen, I said, "I want, in another year, next spring, I want to go and get a job at the mill."

I don't remember how he agreed, but I told him. I think he agreed. That was almost a year. Finally, when that time come, one morning he had got his

breakfast. We had to go. We were done, and we had our job we were going to do on the pasture fence.

He told me, he done give me the orders, "Come on down and we're going to work on the pasture fence."

But I had in my mind all the time, and hadn't told him, I'm leaving this morning. He went on and started to work down there on the fence. I got everything ready and went on down. I walked up to where he was.

I told him, I said, "You remember last year that I told you that I wanted to go and get a job at the mill where the other boys is? I'm going this morning."

He didn't respond, so I walked on off. I was about seventeen, eighteen. I knew what his plans were. When we finished the job on the fence, we had some bottom land, about maybe a mile or two. That's where the work we were going to do was, the main job. I had been over there. I had three mules to a plow. That fell in his hands.

It was something he hadn't been used to. I went on. I was telling somebody this a few days ago. He must have prayed. I went. I was walking. I got, not halfway, and I met a friend, Horace Washington. I grew up with him. He was on his way back.

We started talking and he told me, he said, "I've been up to that mill to find work, and they're not hiring nobody."

I don't know why. I guess, too, I knew there wasn't any use. That's what I was going for, so I told him, "Well, I'm going back."

I turned around. I knew where my daddy was. I went on, and I got over there where he was with them three mules. He was sweating. I walked up and told him. I said, "Well, I met Horace Washington, and he said they weren't hiring, and I came back."

He twirled them lines and gave them to me. He said, "If you stay and help me with this, when I sell the first bale of cotton, I'll get you a nice suit of clothes."

He did. I remember that. I said, "He must have said his prayers." I stayed with him that year, but the next year I left. I guess it was pretty rough for him.

Dunning: You mentioned that he was a music teacher. Where was that?

Van Hook: That was in Arkansas. I think he went to school for music before he left Louisiana. I know he went to, I believe, it was Coleman College, he called it, in Louisiana. He taught the school there at home for

several sessions. He taught music all around in the county.

Dunning: Did he have a specialty?

Van Hook: Well, what he did, he taught the vocal, like the Stamps Musical Company. He taught the rules, and taught people how to sing. When I was in Prescott, last year, I was at a car salesman's place, a white fellow. His name was Lowdermilk. I told him I knew some Lowdermilks. He told me he knew some Van Hooks.

"Well," he said, "when I was a young kid my daddy used to talk about a man named Van Hook that he sure did love to hear sing."

I said, "That was my daddy."

He said, "He used to love to hear him sing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.'"

My daddy used to lead that arrangement. He would do the lead and people did that voice. That man sure was telling the truth. People sure would request for him to sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Dunning: Did you sing together as a family?

Van Hook: Yes. We sang in the choir. My sisters, they sang as a quartet.

Dunning: In the hometown?

Van Hook: Yes.

Dunning: Where would they perform?

Van Hook: You mean where they would go to sing? They didn't just travel, but around in the county there at the different churches. And then at our own church.

Early Schooling at Mt. Canaan School

Dunning: Can you tell me something about your schooling?

Van Hook: Yes, I can. I remember when I first started the school. I was laughing about it a few days ago. Them three brothers of mine. Mother got me ready to start out. I remember the first day. She got me ready and dressed and everything, and told us to go. I left crying and they were dragging me for about two days.

From what they've all said, my parents, and brothers, and teachers, I was very apt to learn things. My daddy, one thing he promised that he didn't live up to. He said he was going to see to it that I went to school. But he didn't. I guess things got pretty rough. Times got hard.

But I remember going up to the sixth grade. That was right there in the community where I grew up, Mt. Canaan School, where I last went. I didn't

get the schooling that they had planned for me to get. My sisters, younger than me, two of them went to college in Little Rock. But my brothers of us didn't get too far. But I certainly appreciate what I did get. It's been well worthwhile to me.

Dunning: Do you think your sisters went to college because they were on the younger side of the family?

##

Van Hook: Yes. There was two of them who went to Little Rock Baptist College, I believe it was. Anyway, I think my daddy was more financially able to school them than when I was growing up. But I was, I'd say, fourteen or fifteen years old before I went out of school.

I never will forget a teacher I had there. I went to him when, I guess, he was my third teacher, when I was maybe in second grade. Years later, he taught a session of summer school at Mt. Canaan school. I was a teenager.

He was known. He had a record of being mean, and would punish you. He weighed over two hundred pounds. I was teenage, but I was glad to get him when he taught that session in there.

Dunning: He sounds kind of intimidating.

Van Hook: He was. He was.

Dunning: Did you have any favorite subjects?

Van Hook: Not really.

Dunning: Any subjects that you particularly disliked?

Van Hook: You mean in school?

Dunning: In school.

Van Hook: No, not really. I did love mathematics, and wanted to go farther in it. That's what I loved. I didn't get near where I had planned to go, but what I did get, I can say now helped.

Ambitions as a Teenager

Dunning: As a teenager, did you have certain ambitions, things that you wanted to do with your life?

Van Hook: Well, as a teenager, yes. I've always wanted to travel, change states. I never will forget when I first began to leave home going out for jobs. I didn't have no experience, and sometimes didn't have my fare where I wanted to go. But I loved to go places. I loved to travel.

I'll never forget, the first streetcar I rode was in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. I was just right off the farm. I hadn't never ever saw one. But I say

the good Lord will guide you, your trusting soul. That's what it was.

I didn't know better than to leave home and go to Pine Bluff. I had an uncle there and didn't have his address. All I knew, he lived on the west side.

I got off of the train and I saw the streetcars. I went straight to a streetcar there. I saw one, "East." I didn't bother it. Then finally a "West" car pulled up. There was a lady there catching it. I just watched her. She got on, put some money in there and sat down. The people would get off, and I just sat there. I didn't know whether he was just a little ways out west, out on the far end, so I rode it to the end and got off.

There was three or four fellows sitting over on a bench. I went over there and asked them. One of them--he wanted to say he knew my uncle. But he didn't, so they left me cold. Anybody else, I imagine, when they left there they would have went up the walkway.

But there was a kind of little lumberyard, and what looked like an old park, and a little railroad going up through there. A trail up in the center of it. That's what I chose. I chose to go that way. I started walking up that little railroad track, and on across the lumberyard.

Then I heard some knocking noise. I went straight to it, and it was a blacksmith's big shop. The first place, I went in the door where there was a man, and just asked him, "Do you know a man that lives around here named John Van Hook?" He said, "He's in the shop in there."

Dunning: Your ESP was working.

Van Hook: It was working. I mean, it worked, doing the things, and going, and choosing the directions I did, and went right straight to him. He hadn't seen me since I was a child, and he didn't know me. He came out of his shop with a container full of steel shavings where he had been drilling to throw away. I was so glad.

But I stopped him. I called his name and called him uncle. He looked down at me and he throwed the thing down there and grabbed me. I'll tell you, that was my first being out of town into a city, you know, being out of the country. He got me a job there. I stayed there with him a while.

Dunning: Was that your first paying job?

Van Hook: No. That wasn't my first paying job. He got me this job on the Cotton Belt Railroad, and I had been working before.

Dunning: What was your first job?

Van Hook: My first job was on the railroad, on a section. My daddy carried me. It was a little log camp down two or three miles. He carried me down and talked to the foreman. He didn't hire me then, but the next time I went back he put me to work. I was seventeen.

Dunning: Do you remember your salary then?

Van Hook: Let's see. I believe we was working for a dollar and a half a day. I think that's what the salary was. Later on, years later, after I grew up, I worked for that same company. I remembers well what it was. It was two and a quarter a day.

We were away from home a few miles. We boarded. Me and my brother worked for two and a quarter a day. I did remember what we were paying for board. I know, we would have nine dollars after our board was paid. We would have nine dollars.

Dunning: Who would you pay board to?

Van Hook: A lady that lived there by the name of Mrs. Mandy Goldsmith. That's where we boarded.

Dunning: Did you ever pay board at home?

Van Hook: No. We never did pay board at home. We were always welcome. Even after we grew up and had families, we would go home and enjoy meals. We were just used to that.

Dunning: How did your family support such a big group? All those children?

Van Hook: All those, that's right. Well, being on the farm, daddy grazed cattle and hogs, and they always had a big garden. That helped so much. They didn't have much of a financial income. He taught school. That helped. But that garden, and hogs, he was pretty good on livestock and hogs. He kept hogs and cattle. That was one of the main, main dependents. They milked maybe four or five cows sometimes.

I remember the lesson that I got when my sisters were milking the cows. They complained about one of the cows' bag being so soiled up. They always washed the bags, but one of them was always soiled--so they didn't know what was going on.

Dunning: Now was this the bag that you would put the milk in, or--?

Van Hook: No, this was her bag, the cow's bag. Finally, one morning my sisters went real early to milk. That's what I said was a good lesson, the early stirring, what the early bird, means. So they got down and they found what was going on. My daddy had a hog with a litter of pigs right around there too. Before she would get up, one of these pigs, just one out of the group, would go to the cow and get his breakfast.

Dunning: That explains it.

Van Hook: That's right. That's what it was. A strange thing about this, this went on for some time.

Dunning: The cow was very accommodating?

Van Hook: Yes. [laughs]. This went on for some time, and we didn't know that it was just this one pig. He just outgrew the others. Nobody knew. He was just so beautiful and slick. The others were little and puny. That went on for some time. I'll never forget. That was a lesson to getting up early. [laughs]

Dunning: That's a wonderful story. Was there a training in any field that you would have liked to have had?

Van Hook: Training?

Dunning: Yes. If you had been able to continue school, is there any area that you would have concentrated on?

Van Hook: I never did choose, I remember, to want to be a teacher. But I did want to be a builder, a carpenter, which I did later on. I got into the carpenter's union, and that was my job. I did very well at it too.

I did not want to be a farmer. I tell people right away. To be a farmer, I had my part of it. I didn't want to have anything to do with it, or to be around a mule I was kicked twice by.

Once, I say it was just the Lord that saved my life. He just didn't let him through the gate. It was a mischievious type of mule. He didn't have a bridle on. When I let him through the gate, and I went to shut the gate, the mule got loose from me and he just raised up and kicked. I was just an inch or two too far, but his foot hit me on the back of the head. All I could say is that I was just a little bit too far for him to hit me.

Then another time, I was fixing to bridle a mule in the stable, and he was going around, and around, and around. He finally got his feet to me, and he kicked me. I think I had on a jacket, and it just brushed that jacket. So both of those mules just did miss hurting me bad. I've said, I didn't want no part of them no more.

Dunning: They say the third time never fails.

Van Hook: Right.

Arrival in Richmond, 1943

Work in the Kaiser Shipyard

Dunning: What circumstances brought you to Richmond?

Van Hook: Yes, that's a question I can answer. I'll never forget. I began to hear of the salary and money that they were making in the shipyards. I began to want

to go. Then I had a friend or two, and a relative to me come here, and I could hear from them. I decided I wanted to go. I made up my mind I wanted to go. I was married and had all of my children but one.

Dunning: How many was that?

Van Hook: There was eight of them.

Dunning: You have eight children?

Van Hook: Yes, when I left there.

Dunning: So you had nine all together?

Van Hook: That's right.

Dunning: Goodness.

Van Hook: Yes, like my dad and mother. Anyway, when I made up my mind to go, I would always do this, I talked to dad. He lived up the road. I went up and talked to him. He didn't disagree.

I told him, "I've made up my mind. I'm going."

I just wanted his idea on it, you know. So I went on, and maybe two weeks later, it was my time to go. I went back up there for something and he followed me out. We sat down on the steps.

My daddy told me, he said, "I hear that there's no place out there to live. People that are working are sleeping in tents and whatnots. There's really nowhere you can stay. So I just don't think you ought to go."

I just let him talk. I didn't usually do him like that, but this was a case that I felt like I had better judge myself. I let him talk, and when he got through talking, I got up and left. I think it was the next day, I caught a bus at Prescott and left. They gave me a ticket to San Francisco.

Dunning: Who would give you a ticket?

Van Hook: There in the bus station.

Dunning: Was that a free ticket if you agreed to work?

Van Hook: No. I did have a work card, what they called a work card. The news had come out that if you leave coming to California, go to the unemployment and get what they called a work card, and bring it to the employment office in Richmond. I went to Hope and got that card, but I had to buy my ticket. I forget what it cost. Forty dollars, I believe.

When I got to San Francisco, I caught a bus and come on to Berkeley, found a place to stay. The next day, I made my way to Sixth and Nevin in Richmond. That's where the state employment was. When I got there, they told me that I didn't need the card, that

they were hiring everybody that came at Ninth and Nevin.

I went over there and got in line. It took me a good long while to go through that line. I never will forget when the lady asked me what yard did I want to work in. I didn't know what yard I wanted. She chose for me.

She said, "Yard Three?"

I told her, "Yes." And that was the best yard.

I went in there and went to work as a driller. I would work hard. We did the drilling and the bolting of the bulkheads on the sides of the ships. My supervisor was a fine guy. I believe his name was Ted Kilgore. Ted Kilgore, a young white fellow. He stayed right with me, and I worked hard.

After I was there maybe a year, a year and a half, one night, he came in and told me, "Get them gloves off. You're in charge of the crew."

Dunning: So you got a promotion?

Van Hook: I got a promotion there. I was proud of that. I made it all right.

Dunning: How old were you?

Van Hook: I was getting up close to forty. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine.

Dunning: You were thirty-eight when you left Arkansas?

Van Hook: Yes.

Dunning: That was quite a brave move.

Van Hook: That's right. I believe I was thirty-eight. I had to register in the Army, and I didn't pass on account of the children. I was in, what was it, third class, or--

Dunning: On account of what?

Van Hook: All my children. I had my children.

Dunning: Oh. Because you had so many children?

Van Hook: Yes. I think that's what it was, but I didn't have to go.

Dunning: What year was it when you came out to California?

Van Hook: Nineteen forty-three. The very first of '43, in January.

Dunning: Can you talk a little bit about your first impression of Richmond?

Van Hook: Yes. I've always thought Richmond would be a good place to live. When I first came here, we found it very, very peaceable, for so many people to be working together, and being together. I think in my first days of being here, that it took some very, very good-natured people to get along and to make a living.

It was kind of rough after the shipyards went down, and it was kind of hard to find a job. But I have never seen a time that I would have left Richmond to go to any of these other places close by.

Dunning: What did it look like?

Van Hook: Well, during that time, they were building these housing projects.

Dunning: Was that the war housing?

Van Hook: That's right. There was a lot of them. They looked good, but the traffic wasn't like it is now. There weren't as many cars and traffic. The highways, we didn't have them, and it made it look different. It was a very fine looking little city. I just think I made the right choice when I came to Richmond.

Dunning: Was there a real feeling of patriotism at the shipyards?

Van Hook: Yes. I tell you, I just think that that many people going in and out of the shipyard, and it being as peaceable as it was, I just think it's commendable.

Dunning: Why do you think it was peaceful?

Van Hook: Because we didn't ever have no shootouts or nothing like that.

Dunning: Why do you think there was this peaceful atmosphere? The reasons behind it?

Van Hook: Well, I'll tell you, I just won't be able to answer that, because since then, there has been some things that just didn't happen back then in those days. There was so many people then that were working together, going together, riding together. Once in a while there would be a little dispute, but not--

Dunning: The work force was pretty integrated. How about the neighborhoods in Richmond at that time, the war housing, were they segregated, or-?

Van Hook: They were, in a way, kind of segregated. The housing on Twenty-fifth, and Twenty-third was all blacks. Down on Cutting, though, in the housing down there, it was pretty well mixed on one side over there. They didn't have no serious troubles in the projects at all, or racial problems.

The Singing Shipbuilders[2]

Dunning: I want to ask you how you first started getting involved with the Singing Shipbuilders.

Van Hook: Yes. Well, it just happened like this. I was living on Twenty-fifth Street. I had a neighbor that I just met him after I moved there. I was a barber. I cut hair.

This neighbor, he lived in the next apartment up from me there. We, me and my brother, was living there together. Dock Jordan, he was my next-door-neighbor. I didn't know he was a singer. I didn't know anything about him. But he would come in there. He mentioned what he did about the quartet.

But one day, he was there, and I was cutting hair. There was several fellows waiting. He said to us that he was trying to find fellows to start a quartet, and that's the way it got started. He didn't know that I was a singer. I had been singing in choir, and I sang in a quartet back home.

We responded to him, and let him know that we were songsters. It worked out pretty good. From then on, we would get together and rehearse. His brother that was singing the bass wasn't too dependable, so while we were there one day, I was busy cutting hair, and Emmett Avery, a much better

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[2]For more information on the Singing Shipbuilders, see page 46.

bass than his brother, he happened to come for a haircut and heard us talking and singing. He joined us. We went from there.

This real estate man heard us sing in the shipyard, and he sponsored us.

Dunning: What was his name?

Van Hook: J. P. Owens.

Dunning: Is he still alive?

Van Hook: I don't know whether he is or not. But we got with him. Then he carried us to KRE radio station, and we started doing some broadcasting once a week. What I think about very often, is that we're all living. And all the other quartets I can think of that we sang with in different places here, there's maybe two of them left.

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Dunning: I want to clarify something. You mentioned you were working as a barber. Was that in addition to your shipyard work?

Van Hook: Yes. During the early '40s, during the shipyard, there wasn't many barbers. They would just crowd in. Of course, I cut hair in the barber shop in my home state, and then I cut hair in a shop in Louisiana

when I went to Louisiana. But here, this was before the barber colleges. You could just cut anywhere.

Dunning: You didn't have to have a license?

Van Hook: You didn't have to have a license. I cut hair. It helped a lot, too. That's been one of my gifts that I'm thankful for. I still cut a little and I still have my tools.

I left Richmond in 1951. I went to Alaska. That was when they were building 500-man barracks, and electrical buildings. There was a lot of work. They had heard it over the news and in the papers. I was a carpenter, so I went over there and carried my hair tools, too. That's where I cut all kinds of hair. Oh, I'm telling you.

Dunning: That was your moonlighting.

Van Hook: That's right. That salary they were paying, I forget, but the carpenters, we were making almost twice what we would make here. It was a long flight to go for work, but I did. I went in '51, and I went back in '52 and '53. I've always wanted to go places.

Dunning: When did your family join you, your wife and chidren?

Van Hook: You mean when I came here?

Dunning: Yes.

Van Hook Family Reunites in California, 1944

Van Hook: In '43 I went back to Arkansas in the summer, then I came back here. I believe it was in January of 1944 when they came to Richmond.

Dunning: The whole crew?

Van Hook: The whole crew. I'm telling you.

Dunning: How old was the youngest at that time?

Van Hook: The youngest, oh yes, he wasn't a year old.

Dunning: And how about the oldest?

Van Hook: The oldest one was teenaged then, just getting maybe thirteen or fourteen. I carried my wife to the shipyard. I got her a job as a welder.

Dunning: Your wife worked as a welder?

Van Hook: She worked as a welder. We both worked together, and I tell you, that was quite a change from what we had worked through. We were working together and drawing our pay. We cashed our checks together on Tuesday mornings, I believe it was. We had our money, saving our money. That was quite a thrill.

Dunning: Where did you live?

Van Hook: I lived on Twenty-fifth Street down right where that light is there on Hoffman on Twenty-fifth, right down just about a block. Then I moved from there to State Street. That's over right where Fifty-second goes across.

Dunning: Was this with your family?

Van Hook: Yes. We moved over there. Then we bought a place up on Forty-first and Potrero. This was in the late '50s. We stayed there until this resettlement or whatever it was--

Dunning: The redevelopment?

Van Hook: Redevelopment, they bought the place.

Dunning: Where are most of your children now?

Van Hook: They are here. They are all here in California. They're in Richmond, Berkeley, and San Jose. One of my sons is in Stockton.

Dunning: How about your sisters and brothers? Did many of them come out here?

Van Hook: All of them.

Dunning: All of them? The dozen?

Van Hook: Yes. All of the sisters and my brothers, they came right after I did.

Dunning: Did they come to Richmond?

Van Hook: Yes. They're here now. My brothers, we all, at least four of us did, live in Richmond. And my sisters, there's one in Berkeley. The others are in Richmond. I lost two sisters.

Dunning: But your brothers are all alive?

Van Hook: The four of us.

Dunning: Some of them must be in their eighties now.

Van Hook: My oldest brother must be eighty now. I think he was eighty in May. The other one is, I think, about seventy-nine.

Dunning: Did your parents stay in Arkansas when all the family came out, or did they come out here too?

Van Hook: They were here too. Right here.

Dunning: That must have been quite an adjustment for them coming from the farm.

Van Hook: That's right, but they made it just fine. My mother didn't seem to ever be bothered. She was content. My daddy was kind of disturbed. Of course, he would see so many people working and going to work, and he

was just sitting around. This was before he was aged too much.

I had a friend by the name of Floyd Brown. He's here now in Richmond. He just volunteered one day.

He asked me, he said, "Is all your brothers working?"

I said, "Yes. They're all working."

I thought about my daddy. I knew he had been worrying about not doing something. I said, "My dad ain't working."

He said, "Well tell him to go down on San Pablo Avenue. Tell him to go to the Painters Union, and tell them I sent him."

So I told him about it, and he wanted to go. I carried him down there. The man asked him a few questions and just took him right in and sent him to the paint shop at one of the shipyards. There wasn't too much work, but the paint shop was still going. That's where he worked. He was just cleaning up around there, and he made good.

One of the fellows that worked there wouldn't let him do nothing rough. If he would catch my daddy doing something rough, he would take it from him. I didn't never meet up with that man until after my daddy had passed.

I was at the barber shop one day, and all the barbers was there. They got to talking with me, and called my name. One man remembered my daddy, and asked me, "Was that my daddy who used to work in the paint shop."

He told me his name, and he was the one that used to try to look after him. I sure appreciated that.

Stories of the Shipyards

Dunning: What year did you leave the shipyards?

Van Hook: We left the shipyards, I believe it was in 1945. That was kind of sad for me to have to leave. I started before the building of the ships. We built fifty there in Yard Three, and I worked on all of them but one. I worked on forty-nine.

I tried to get with the repairs. They paid a little more too, than the builders. Anyway, during the process, I decided I wanted to go ahead with the carpenters. But that shipbuilding was what I regretted to see go.

Dunning: Did you get much, or any, notice on when you were going to lose your job?

Van Hook: No, we didn't. Sure didn't.

Dunning: How did you find out?

Van Hook: The foreman told us, "After we do such and such a number here, that may be all for us." That's the way he would talk. "When we get such-and-such done, that's going to be it." But finally it came.

Dunning: Did they let everyone go at once, or was it gradual?

Van Hook: It was kind of gradual. Maybe the drillers would go, and then maybe some of the other chippers. But the welders and chippers, I think they stayed longer than most of them.

Dunning: Did your wife keep her job longer than you?

Van Hook: No. No, she didn't. She went before I did. She learned to be one of the good welders there. That was some, some experience, that shipyard.

Dunning: Any stories that really stand out in your mind?

Van Hook: Yes. Let's see. I remember about my wife, she came to me one night crying. Oh that sure did disturb me. She was welding in the plate shop. She told me what happened in there. They had transferred her to the double bottom. That was down in first floor of the ship. There was just a big crew down there of all kinds, and they were just like they didn't respect nobody. So she told me. They had been bothering her and picking at her, telling her what she would do.

Dunning: Were these men doing that?

Van Hook: Men, yes. I didn't question to find out who the guys were, I just went straight to the superintendent. Usually when they transfer you, if you didn't want to stay there, you would have to go.

I went to him and told him what happened. He sent her right back to the plate shop, where she had already been. That saved, I'd say, trouble for me. I just went down there and took a look.

I think what they were doing, they were welders, and burners, and chippers. I think their job was to do work on parts of the ship and take them out to other places. They just stayed down there all the time. They just had their way; I think they would do anything they wanted to down there. A decent person just wouldn't want to go down in the double bottom. I wanted to be respected. That was one of the low grades of the shipbuilding.

Dunning: Did you work with many women in your section?

Van Hook: Yes. Yes, I did. I worked with welders. We got very well acquainted with each other. It was a nice group of welders. I never will forget.

I'll tell you this. I wasn't there to see this. This was one of a few fights, racial, that happened there. Every night, at worktime, when we got in, we

would all go to the tool shed to get our tools and whatnot. They'd be a gang of both white and black. But anyway, this was on the job. I had a brother that was there.

And there was a stage rigger, a white fellow, on this stage. There were stages on different levels. The riggers carried hammers. There was an overbearing, I would say, black fellow down on the next stage, and the white fellow's hammer fell right by him. My brother said he cussed up and down.

The man said, "If that hammer hits me, I'll come up there and invade you."

That guy told him, "I don't mean to hurt you."

My brother, he tried to mock them both.

Dunning: What did your brother try to do?

Van Hook: He tried to imitate them, how they sound.

Then he cursed him. He said, "If you don't like that, come on down here."

The white guy said, "Well, I ain't had a fight in a long time." He went climbing down.

He said they were both about the same size. He said they went together something fierce.

Dunning: On the staging?

Van Hook: No. Down. They climbed down. He told him, "Come on down."

The gang got out there, and got around them, and stayed and watched them a while. Then finally, some of the guys said, "Well, let's stop them."

So they stopped them, pulled them apart. The funny part about it, the next night, coming into work at the tool sheds, this black guy finally came in, walking.

There was a bunch of his buddies over there, seeing him, "Hey. Hey man, listen. Now, who won that fight last night?"

"I don't know. I don't want to fight with so-and-so no more."

[laughs]. We laughed about it. That was so funny. They just clobbered one another. He told them he didn't want to know who won the fight.

Dunning: So nobody won?

Van Hook: No. But he must have had a pretty good contest the way he said he didn't want to know who won.

Dunning: From the people that you met in the shipyards, where did most of the people come from?

Van Hook: Well, let's see. I want to say Texas and Arkansas. I met a lot of people from Arkansas. I think maybe, I'd say Arkansas, because there was a lot of us.

Dunning: Were there many whites that came from the South also?

Van Hook: No, not too many. I remember meeting a young fellow that I knew back in Arkansas. I didn't get to talk with him but one night. His daddy used to be a trucker. He drove a truck all the time. I met up with his son in the shipyard. I heard of others being here, but I didn't get to see them. I did meet a fellow who grew up right close to me in Arkansas. We stopped and talked.

Dunning: Were there many people from Oklahoma and the Midwest?

Van Hook: Yes, there was some from Oklahoma all right. I can't remember a person who was special. But Texas and Arkansas, I remember, some of them I got acquainted with.

Dunning: Did you find that your friends were mostly from the South when you moved here? Did you sort of stay together?

Van Hook: Yes, we did. Maybe the first ones would get here, and the others would write them and contact them.

Dunning: It would be kind of a network?

Van Hook: That's right.

Postwar Work at Moore Shipyard

Dunning: What did you do after the war, after you both lost your jobs?

Van Hook: Yes, after the war I went first out on a construction job with the laborers. Then, I had a friend of mine who was from back home who was a carpenter. He had been a carpenter for some time. He told me that they were taking carpenters then at Moore Shipyard, that is, shipwrights. He went with me over there. They took me in the union right then, and they sent me out in the yard.

Dunning: What union was that?

Van Hook: That was 1149. It was then what they called the shipwrights and joiners. But it's the carpenters, and when you leave the shipyard, you can go right on to construction. That's what I did. I went to work then, as a carpenter. I first worked on the Moore shipyard.

Dunning: Were you doing repairs?

Van Hook: Repairs.

Dunning: On what kind of boats or ships?

Van Hook: They were transports, same as the ones we built in Yard Three. I don't think I worked on a battleship. They were transports.

Dunning: And how about your wife? Was she able to find work after the war?

Van Hook: No. She didn't find no work then. After she left the shipyard, she worked at a baker shop for a while. She worked in a cafeteria. The kids were all growing up then, and finally the boys were getting to go in the service and marry off. I had three sons. All of my sons went in the service.

Dunning: How many sons did you have?

Van Hook: Five.

Dunning: Five sons and four daughters?

Van Hook: Four daughters. They all went in the service but one. The youngest one didn't go. My oldest son, that's the one up there in the electric business.

Dunning: Clarence?

Van Hook: Clarence.

Dunning: I remember the name from the article. And how old is he now?

Van Hook: Clarence must be about fifty-two. Yes, it just don't seem possible.

Dunning: How old are you?

Van Hook: Seventy-six. I was born in 1906.

Dunning: That's something, to have a son fifty-two.

Van Hook: That's right. I had a daughter when I was eighteen. She's not of the mother, you know, that all these nine are.

Dunning: Oh.

Van Hook: Yes.

Dunning: You were married before, or you had a child?

Van Hook: No, I just had a child when I was eighteen. She lives in Oakland. She's got a big family, started when she was about sixteen, seventeen. I was over there to her birthday, and they brought her little boy, a fine little fellow, about five or six months old, and handed him to me.

They told me, "That's Felice's little boy." My great granddaughter's little boy.

Dunning: So you have a great great grandson?

Van Hook: Right. I say that's a blessing.

Dunning: Did you keep in contact with her as she was growing up?

Van Hook: Sure did.

Dunning: But she didn't live with your family?

Van Hook: No. I feel that I've been blessed to see my children.

Dunning: How many grandchildren do you have?

Van Hook: I've got to check. Somebody else asked me that, and I wasn't able to say. The last count, I believe, was thirty-something.

Dunning: You would need a calculator.

Van Hook: That's right.

Dunning: Now, I'm sure, there are other great grandchildren.

Van Hook: That's right. I'm going to check that out too.

Gospel Quartet, 1943 to 1946

Dunning: Do you have any other special recollections of the shipyard, or of your quartet, the Singing Shipbuilders? Like where you performed, and how the audience received you?

Van Hook: Well, I believe one of our big thrillers was we were on a program with the Rising Star. That was the famed quartet. They used to be in Chicago, and then they came here. I believe we performed in Berkeley with them.

Then we sang with the Gregg Brothers. They were out of Hope, Arkansas. They were real famous. We sang with them in Oakland. We really had some wonderful times and a lot of fun going around in Richmond to different churches.

I had the guy laughing about the bass singer. I don't know, it was just a part of him to go to sleep. And he was hard to wake up. Sometimes when we were having a rehearsal, we would have to go get him, and then we couldn't wake him up at the door. Working graveyard shift had some effects on it.

Anyway, we were singing one night in North Richmond at Davies Chapel. After we got through singing, they were raising the offering. We were sitting in chairs up on the stage and they brought the offering baskets and were passing it. They started up at the lead singer, and he was sitting next to me right on the last seat.

I started trying to wake him. Finally, I shook him so hard until he woke up and looked at me and frowned up. They hadn't got to him, and he just

dropped on back to sleep, so when they got to me, I went to shaking him again and got him woke.

He looked and saw the basket, and then he put his hand in it, and I shook him again. "No, no, no. Don't you loot."

He said, "Oh. I thought that was the circle they were passing around." [laughs].

We had problems with him, but when we got him woke and got him singing, he was as good a bassist as you would want. He had a real good voice.

Dunning: How many years did you stay together?

Van Hook: Let's see. We started in '43 and stayed together until somewhere around 1946.

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Dunning: Why did you split up?

Van Hook: Well, somebody left, it seemed to me. Then it just finally quit coming together. We really didn't have no falling out or nothing of the kind. We all were still living. It seemed to me like somebody left.

I know the tenor singer said that he was going to be singing somewhere as long as he lived. He tried to live up to it. He went with another group. I think there was two of them that went to another

group, so that meant we just never did get back together again.

Dunning: Have you had any singing reunions?

Van Hook: While we were together we didn't have that. We just sang for different churches. Some churches would give us a week's program, to have us sing every night through the week.

Dunning: But after you split up, did you ever get together and sing?

Van Hook: No, we didn't. Only once. That was, I'd say, in 1969, I believe, many years later, the only time we got together. That's when I was operating the service station there on Thirty-seventh and Cutting.

I was just thinking about the group. We were all still living, so I decided to give them a chance to get together and have kind of a little party, and invite them. I did, and they met. We had a famous guitarist this side of San Francisco, a black fellow who was blind. He came. We had a table of food.

That was the first time we had been together since we quit singing regular.

Dunning: Are there still tapes from KRE? Have you heard those?

Van Hook: I sure haven't.

Dunning: I bet you would love to hear those.

Van Hook: I sure would. That's right.

Dunning: Do you have any tapes of your music?

Van Hook: No, I don't.

Dunning: That might be something to ask at the radio station. Maybe, if they still have them in their archives, you could get a copy. It would sure be wonderful for your family.

Van Hook: Yes. That's right. Sure would.

Reflections on Richmond, 1983

Dunning: I just have a few more questions about Richmond. How would you describe Richmond today?

Van Hook: I would describe it as fair. I think it's still a good place to live, but I would say, in some ways, there's lots of room for improvement. This problem that they've been having now with the police has been kind of disgusting. I think there needs to be some improvements both ways. That's the way I feel. [phone rings].

I still say Richmond is my favorite place to live. Three years ago now, I was living in Hayward

and working as a security guard. A security guard job opened up in El Sobrante, and I needed a place close by. My daughter got busy and signed me up with this housing.

At first, some of them had said there's a six month waiting list. Finally, they came around and let me have this place. They started me in here, being a senior, you know, at forty-eight dollars a month.

Dunning: You can't complain about that.

Van Hook: No, no. It's my choice, Richmond.

Dunning: How long were you in Hayward?

Van Hook: I was there about a year and a half.

Dunning: Other than that you've mostly been in Richmond?

Van Hook: In Richmond, yes.

Return to Arkansas, 1970s

Dunning: You did mention that you went back in the early '70s to Arkansas.

Van Hook: I did.

Dunning: What brought you back to Arkansas?

Van Hook: One of the main things, I bought the timber off of the home place from my other two brothers. Yes, there was three of us that owned it. I decided I wanted to go home and handle that sale of the timber and live there. I said I would live there. I was retired and wasn't going to do anything but maybe work a little. That's what I did, but when I sold the timber and settled down, I had some domestic problems, so I decided to come back here. And my children were here, calling me and telling me I was too far, so I just come back.

Dunning: You went back to Arkansas by yourself?

Van Hook: No, I was married and had a wife.

Dunning: Was this your first wife?

Van Hook: No. This was another one. I married her in 1965. We went back to Arkansas. But I came back. After I came back here I think I made the right choice of where to live.

Changes in Richmond

Dunning: What are the most obvious changes in Richmond that you've seen since you came here in the war years?

Van Hook: Well, let's see. The most changes since the war years, I would say, would be the high prices and the pay scales went far, far, higher than it was then. That's one. I would say the pay rates is one of the great changes. I don't say it hurts. I'm afraid to say it's worse than it was then, because people now that work have just about anything they need, but it's because of the rate of pay they get.

Dunning: Do you mean those people that belong to unions?

Van Hook: I mean the working class of people now. Of course, unemployment is getting worse and all, but people still have more than they had to live on in those days.

Dunning: Do you see the population changing?

Van Hook: Yes.

Dunning: In what way?

Van Hook: One of the big changes here in Richmond is the black people. There seems to be more. The black and the foreigners.

Dunning: By foreigners, who do you mean?

Van Hook: I mean the people out of other countries. I just noticed here lately, you can notice in the shopping places and other places where people are, that there's more blacks now than I've ever seen before. There's more of the foreign people too. I know when I was living in Hayward, there was places where they were crowded out there. I was just noticing all the foreign people in lines and places. That's a big change. That's really, really a change.

Dunning: What about in the neighborhood?

Van Hook: In the neighborhood? Well, I haven't picked up on any real changes. Well, yes, it is too. I think crime has stepped up lots around now. Back in those days when the shipyard was running, you didn't hear of much purse snatching, robbery and like that. That's a change. It's getting worse. Now, people are afraid--a man my age, some places he just better not go.

Dunning: Do you feel threatened?

Van Hook: Yes. I do. I won't go out walking nowhere at night because I hear too much of carrying on, and purse snatching, and robbery. That's the change.

Dunning: What do you think are the biggest problems that are facing Richmond right now?

Van Hook: I think that is the biggest problem that's facing--you mean facing the city of Richmond?

Dunning: Yes.

Van Hook: I see. I may be unable to think of it right now. Richmond has had of late some crosses that makes us wonder.

These lawsuits that they've been having--I don't know, I think of it and think of both sides of it. I know you have some brutality on the police's side. We've had some all right. But what could we do if we didn't have them? I think that's about one of the problems that we have in this conflict between the police and citizens. I just hope to see it cleared up and things move on peaceful. That's what I can see.

Dunning: What do you feel about Richmond's image from the outside?

Van Hook: Image from the outside? You mean--?

Dunning: What other people think of Richmond. We both know that people, particularly with some of the press reports, you only hear the bad things.

Van Hook: That's right. That's the truth.

Dunning: How is that for you living in Richmond?

Van Hook: It doesn't matter too much with me because I've been here long enough to know about what it's like. I know that from the outskirts and other places, they call Richmond a bad place. I know that. But then, what makes it bad is what the people are doing.

But still, I'm glad that I'm able to keep myself in the clear from being in the crime. I'm not going to join nobody in carrying on no kind of crime because there's no part of that in my system to harm or hurt nobody.

I could have shot a man. I guess he had a key. He came in here one night.

Dunning: He came into this apartment?

Van Hook: He came into this apartment after I was here near three years. I didn't have the gun when I first heard the noise. But when he opened my bedroom door I woke up. Instead of shooting him, I hollered. I didn't holler, but I spoke. I just said, "Hey!" When I first woke up and he came in the door. He was a young short black fellow.

When I said that, he came back and he had that slide door open right there, and he went out. I grabbed the gun and got up and rushed in here, and he was gone. In a way, I'm glad I didn't kill him.

Dunning: How long have you kept a gun?

Van Hook: I've had a gun here the whole time I've been here.

Dunning: Since you moved here in the '40s?

Van Hook: Yes. So that's the part that's hurting us, all this crime. We've got people that will do anything to you. I know Richmond has their share of those kind of people.

Closing Remarks

Dunning: Do you have any ideas for improving things, or any solutions?

Van Hook: I think, and I wonder. I've said it to some of the pastors and church people. I would say that we need more regenerated and converted people in the cities. Now that's the only answer I could give that would help this situation.

People that have been converted and regenerated, born again, they will not do these crimes, murder people, snatch purses, and kill people like they're doing. What it takes to get more of them is more good leadership in the ministry, and more sincere followers in the churches. I think that would help take care of it.

Otherwise, I just don't know of anything that would do it, because people now don't think but one

way, and that's for themselves. They don't care for each other.

Dunning: Do you have a few words to say on Richmond politics?

Van Hook: Well, I'm not much of a politician. That's the answer to that. I never was much of a politician. But if there was a question or two on politics that you could think of--

Dunning: I just wondered if there were any political figures, either locally or nationally, whom you have particularly liked or disliked.

Van Hook: There's none particularly that I can think of that I dislike. I was at Congressman George Miller's shower about three weeks ago out there at the city hall. There were lots of people. It certainly was encouraging to see how they carried it out. It was a well-mixed program. Both races worked together all the way through.

He was called on last, along about the last of the program. He took the stage, and commented very serious on the food preparing.

Dunning: The food program?

Van Hook: I mean the food that was prepared for the event. A person called the top lady that prepared it, and he called her to the stand. She was a little young black lady. They just made a little show up there on

the stand. Things like that let you know that there is a peaceable and cooperating, working together. That was really encouraging.

Dunning: Do you remember any political rallies or marches that you were involved in?

Van Hook: No, I sure don't. I never did take a part in a march. I sure didn't. I remember several years ago there was a march down Cutting. Somehow, I just didn't want to get in it.

Dunning: Do you remember what that was for?

Van Hook: I think this march was--there was a black kid shot in North Richmond, and I think they marched for that. I wasn't against all of that, but I just couldn't.

Dunning: How about your children? Are any of them involved in local politics?

Van Hook: No, not really. Clarice, my daughter, she's been working for John Knox, for some fifteen years.

Dunning: Really? In what capacity?

Van Hook: She was a secretary. Now, I don't know what. She took a course of law herself.

Dunning: What is her name now?

Van Hook: Clarice Williams. And this son of mine that's an electrical contractor.

Dunning: Clarence?

Van Hook: Clarence. Otherwise the others--one's a minister.

Dunning: In Richmond?

Van Hook: No, he's in Stockton. I have another son that's a songster. He has his recording all in the room up there. He's been working hard at it.

Dunning: What kind of music?

Van Hook: Gospel music.

Dunning: I just have one more question. Do you have any special ambitions now, things you would like to do, or places you would like to go?

Van Hook: No, no place I would like to go. I'm not too active in doing things like work. I help my son a little up there sometimes, pick up deliveries, just keep moving.

The only thing I've been kind of interested in, concerned, and have high hopes, is I've been ordering some little supplies, clothes, shoes, whatnot, from different little outfits. I have some sweepstakes. One sent me a card here three or four weeks ago. It

was a congratulation card, and said give them about eight weeks.

Dunning: You won a contest maybe?

Van Hook: Well, I won a sweep.

Dunning: A sweepstake?

Van Hook: I think so. That's what they say. I won. If they're jiving me, I say.

Dunning: Do you know what the prize is?

Van Hook: [laughs]. I don't know what it is if they don't send it out. I got another one in the mail yesterday. I don't know this one. But this first one, they've been talking of over $100,000. It's got me wondering. I'll show it to you.

Dunning: That's something to look forward to.

Van Hook: For the last three or four weeks, that's what I've been wondering about, and looking forward to, and wondering what it is. They said to give them about eight weeks.

Dunning: Who sponsored the contest?

Van Hook: The United States Purchasing. They send me a little book about every other month. They'll have sale prices. So I just go for the sale prices and order

and get my packages. They sent me a letter telling me, "You may be the next winner." They finally sent me a card.

Advice to Younger Generations

Dunning: I wish you the best of luck. This tape is just going to run out. Any advice to younger generations, right before the tape runs out?

Van Hook: Yes ma'am. Like I just said, I think what we are struggling with and suffering from is sinful people. That's what's hurting today.

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Van Hook: My advice to young couples is to train their children. Start when they're young. Start when they're young babes, training them and teaching them to find the Good Lord, and stay with him.

My advice to young children is to be obedient to their parents and to find the Good Lord. I believe that if this was improved, our nation would naturally be improved from a peaceful standpoint. Our trouble today, I believe, in the world, is sinful people that are all for themselves and don't know The Lord.

Children today, they do as they please. That's what's hurting us. That's why crime has gone

extremely out of hand, because of young people as they grow up, they haven't been trained and taught. They are not brought up in the church, and they do as they please. They get out on their own, and that's what's hurting us today.

I think today, if the sinful people that are being all for self and don't care for others were looked into, it would be much better. More peace.

Dunning: That sounds like good advice. Thank you very much.

Van Hook: Yes ma'am. Thanks very much. I thank you.

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